

The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception

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1.

The purpose of this paper is to save and carry forward some of Merleau-Ponty's crucial insights. They are not out-dated but capable of coming *after* and exceeding the current emphasis on how the varieties of language and history have re-organized (Foucault says they have "utterly destroyed") the human body.

We will examine and keep three important themes of Merleau-Ponty's, but carry them further in a somewhat different way.

1. He asserted something that is prior to language and concepts. He thought he found that in perception and the body.
2. He asserted something that is not as yet in fixed form, and again it was perception.
3. He wanted to make interaction prior and more than the experience of single subjects. In the chiasm he tried to consider perception as inherently interactional.

Merleau-Ponty is often bypassed today, because it is argued that nothing human is *without* language, or *prior to*, or *outside* of language. In current usage the word "language" includes concepts, history, culture, and politics. The argument makes two related points:

- a) We cannot *talk* or *think* about anything – for example perception and the body – without language and concepts.
- b) Even apart from talking or thinking about it, anything human – for example human bodies, perception, events – have concepts and language *always already implicit in them*. From this fact many people conclude that anything human *depends entirely on* language, concepts, and history. Nothing of the human animal seems to remain. As Foucault (1977: 148)

puts it: Our erstwhile animal bodies were “utterly destroyed” by history. History and language seem utterly to determine what we will perceive, what we will distinguish as touched, seen or heard.

So it can seem to have been an error for Merleau-Ponty to talk of something prior to – or even just other than – language and concepts.

Similarly, about the not-yet-formed which he so strongly emphasized, it is now said that it cannot be something prior and other than linguistic forms. It can only be indeterminate, only a mix of contradictory forms or distinctions, nothing in itself.

Thirdly, while most people now want to make interaction prior to single subjects, currently they think that the most primary interaction is linguistic communication. It seems to them that nothing can be prior to language and history; at most it would be autistic, not interaction.

I stay close to Merleau-Ponty, but I move further in the direction in which he already moves: He greatly enriches and enlarges what can be meant by “perception.” He finds the body’s interaction and intentionality prior and presupposed in perception. I move further in these directions.

I do agree with the current view that language is always already implicit in any human experience, and in anything that one would pick out or distinguish. But I argue that the body is not a mere pre-condition that is wholly transformed once there is language. Language does not entirely determine the body. To show it we can show that the body performs vital functions in language *still now*, and can *still now* imply and create something new that is not determined by language. I have done this at length elsewhere (see my *Thinking Beyond Patterns*, and *Crossing and Dipping*). (Gendlin, 1991, 1992) So I will try to show, on his first theme, that something prior to language *continues to function*, still now, after language.

Similarly, on his second theme: To uphold the priority he gave to what is not yet fully formed, we will show that this *still now* performs functions that a mere indeterminacy could not perform. I will argue that this is done by the body, not by perception.

Thirdly, we can uphold him also in this: There is indeed interaction prior to linguistic communication, and this too still continues to exceed language, even with and after language. But I will argue that it is not only prior to language; it is also prior to perception.

2.

Merleau-Ponty went far beyond the usual understanding of perception. For example, many people say that we don’t actually ever meet and interact.

You know only your perceptions of me, and you interact with those, not with me. You can only have your perceptions, not me. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty argues that the other is always already inherent in the perception, not substituted for by the perception.

In discussing “the chiasm” Merleau-Ponty struggles to insist that *my* sense of touching *you* inherently includes also your sense of touching me. He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is one of the visibles. But the duality remains. As with one person’s two hands touching, only one hand at a time can do the touching, and the other is only touched. The duality is like a screen, a thin sheet, a surface which, in the very act of uniting divides the two sides. His description is elegant in trying to overcome the division by means of the division. But of course the division is retained.

Merleau-Ponty widens the understanding of perception toward including interaction and the body. But in giving the primacy to “perception” he encourages a reading that seems to retain a traditional problem. Let me discuss the traditional problem.

Perception inherently involves a datum, clear or unclear, something that exists *for* someone, happens *to* someone, or is present *before* someone. Perception remains a being-for. If one begins with perception, then interaction seems to consist of two individual percepts.

The percept is a kind of dividing screen. That is not an error. The dividing-screen lies in the very nature of perception. There is an error only in starting with perception. Perception is a datum-having. So it cannot be the basic form of life. The plant *is* an interaction directly with its environment, without a perceptual datum in front of itself. Its body does not first exist and only then interact. Rather, its growth and life-processes consist of environmental interaction. And our bodies also consist of such environmental interaction processes. That kind of interaction is surely prior to the having of presented perceptual data.

When philosophy considers perception it cannot help but consider a percept, something presented, an object constituted *between* the body and the environment. Of course one knows that percepts do not exist alone; they pre-suppose a body; they do not float alone, first. But if one begins by considering perception, the percept puts itself first and divides the perceiver off, puts the perceiver behind the percept, and renders the body as merely a perceiver.

I would like to bring home how odd this common way of proceeding really is. A percept actually exists only as *a presented before*, or a *coming into*, a *coming at*. It exists only *for* someone. And yet it presents itself as if it were a thing that exists. The percept is lopped off, – lops itself off – as if it could be a thing on its own, even while one fully knows that it isn’t. That

is in the very nature of perception, something presented, something happening-to – someone.

Perception divides the someone off, as coming second, understood only backward from what is already a percept. Once the percept is taken as what it seems to be, then the perceiver cannot add much. Traditionally the perceiver added nearly nothing, just the having-of, the consciousness-of, just the perceiver *of-the-percept*, the transparent “of” of the percept.

The scientific construction of the universe consists of percepts and percept-like patterns *presented* before us. It renders humans and animals as something presented – in a space before us (or before someone). But we are not the presented; we are the to-whom of the presented. The to-whom that is inherent in anything presented cannot be a presented datum. So we humans cannot find ourselves within the scientific picture, since it consists of presenteds. We seem to be only the perceivers-of or constructors-of the picture, as if we were outside the universe, the perceiver who does not appear in the percept.

To begin philosophy by considering perception makes it seem that living things can contact reality only through perception. But plants *are* in contact with reality. They *are* interactions, quite without perception. Our own living bodies also *are* interactions with their environments, and that is not lost just because ours also have perception. On the contrary, for us that functions in many additional ways. Animal bodies – including ours – sense themselves, and thereby we sense the interactional living we are. In sensing themselves, our bodies sense our physical environment and our human situations. The perception of colors, smells, and sounds is only a small part of this.

Our bodies sense themselves in living in our situations. Our bodies do our living. Our bodies *are* interaction in the environment; they interact as bodies, not just through what comes with the five senses. Our bodies don’t lurk in isolation behind the five peepholes of perception.

Merleau-Ponty moves strongly to break through this division that is inherent in perception. He says that the body is our first opening to the world and only so is perception possible. This prior work of the body is always latent and implicit in perception. In the body the five senses are together at once. The body has intentionality. When one moves one’s body one aims at the things through it. The body responds to the call of the things, he says.

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty meant to escape the limitations brought by beginning with perception. He meant perception to include (latently and implicitly) also our bodily interactional being-in-the-world, all of our life in situations.

Philosophers are honored most when we move on in the direction in which they point. Let us explore further in this direction which Merleau-

Ponty implied. You can decide exactly whether and just where I leave him. If we still call it the primacy of “perception” then I argue that we must make clear that the way in which that word now works, has greatly changed. What the word “perception” says cannot usually include how the living body *consists of* interactions with the world. “Perception” is usually something that appears before or to – a body. But the body is an interaction also in that it breathes, not only in that it senses the cold of the air. It feeds; it does not only see and smell food. It grows and sweats. It walks; it does not only perceive the hard resistance of the ground. And it walks not just as a displacement between two points in empty space, rather to go somewhere – to answer “the call of the things,” as Merleau-Ponty said. The body senses the whole situation, and it urges, it implicitly shapes our next action. It senses itself living-in its whole context – the situation.

We act in every situation, not just on the basis of colors and smells (not even all five senses crossed so each is in the others), nor just by motions in geometric space. Rather, we act from the bodily sense of each situation. Without the bodily sense of the situation we would not know where we are, nor what we are doing.

Merleau-Ponty should be read as including all of this in the role of the body. The body’s interactional intentionality must not be read as something only latent, only the prior work of the body to make perception possible. It is not merely a philosophically-inferred role only of a *pre-linguistic*, *pre-cultural* body. Rather, the body’s interactional intentionality must be understood as always still with us, now. In sensing itself the body functions as our sense of each situation. It would be a gigantic omission to miss this role of the body’s self-sentience, and to try to constitute the world out of percepts of the five senses.

I will show that if we read Merleau-Ponty in this way, then we have no difficulty answering those who think that we cannot talk of anything before language. Today Merleau-Ponty is made to seem foolish, as if he didn’t know about cultural differences once there is language, and as if he wrote *in language* about perception and a body *without language*, as if he didn’t know that he could not know about how they functioned without language. No, that isn’t so. It is rather *from* how perception and the body *do now* function, still in a much wider way than language, that he tried to show their primacy and priority. And we can continue on from him also by showing the still-now performed functions of the body *in and after* language. Then it can also be obvious that the body functions crucially in trans-historical ways. But it is not the five senses, but the sentient bodily interaction that takes on language and history – and then always still exceeds them. Let me show this:

3.

Merleau-Ponty says, for example, that we sense the space behind our backs. Please notice for a moment that this is true; you can sense the space behind your back.

Is that still to be called “perception?” It is not vision, hearing, or touch, nor is it just the togetherness of the five senses. Is it only some prior work done by the body, to make perception possible? Is it something that is found only *in* vision and *in* touch, only as latent in them? No, it is rather a direct bodily sense that you have and use all the time. If we still call this sensing “perception,” we must make it clear how far we exceed the usual meaning of the word.

You sense behind you not just the space, nor just space-filling visible things. You sense behind you the people to whom you could turn and speak. Those people are part of your situation just now, and you sense them as part of your sense of the situation you are in. You can sense how your present peaceful body-sense would change if you decided now to turn and say something loud to those people. That you won’t do it is all included in the sense of your present situation, which you now have – in a bodily way.

Suppose you are walking home at night, and you sense a group of men following you. You don’t merely *perceive* them. You don’t merely hear them there, in the space in back of you. Your body-sense instantly includes also your hope that perhaps they aren’t following you, also your alarm, and many past experiences – too many to separate out, and surely also the need to do something – walk faster, change your course, escape into a house, get ready to fight, run, shout ...

My “...” expresses the fact that your body-sense includes more than we can list, more than you can think by thinking one thing at a time. And it includes not only what is there. It also implies a next move to cope with the situation. But this implying of your next move is still a ... Your actual move has not yet come.

Since it includes all this, the ... is not just a perception, although it certainly includes many perceptions. It is then a feeling? It is certainly felt, but “feeling” usually means emotion. The ... includes emotions, but also so much else. Is it then something mysterious and unfamiliar? No, we always have such a bodily sense of our situations. You have it now, or you would be disoriented as to where you are and what you are doing.

Isn’t it odd that no word or phrase in our language as yet says this? “Kinaesthetic” refers only to movement; “proprioceptive” refers to muscles. “Sense” has many uses. So there is no common word for this utterly familiar bodily sense of the intricacy of our situations, along with the rapid

weighing of more alternatives than we can think separately. In therapy we now call it a “felt sense.” That phrase can *say* the ... – but only if it brings the ... along with it.

Notice that a ... is implicitly intricate in a way that is more than what is already formed or distinguished. In my example it includes many alternative moves, but more: The ... *implies* a next move – it demands, it urges, it *is* the implying of – a next move, but after-and-with all that it includes, that move is *as yet unformed*.

In these functions of the body we have found two of the three themes of Merleau-Ponty which I mentioned at the start: Something *prior to language and concepts*, and *not-yet-formed*, is still now constantly provided by the body. And so also with the third theme: The ... *is interaction*. It is the body’s way of living its situation. Your situation and you are not two things, as if the external things were a situation without you. Nor is your bodily sense separate from the situation and merely internal. It is certainly not just an emotional reaction to the danger. It is that, but it also includes more of the intricacy of your situation than you can see or think. Your bodily ... *is* your situation. It is not a perceived object before you or even behind you. The body-sense *is* the situation, inherently an interaction, not a mix of two things.

Could one still argue that the ... is merely *indeterminate*? I argue that such a ... is not at all indeterminate. Rather, it is *more determinate* than anything that is already formed. You can see this because the next move, when it comes, will have taken account of more than anything formed can bring. You can see that this bodily function is more than just the contradictory alternatives. If only they were there, they could not be together – they would cancel each other out. But your body can have them together, and what is more, has them weighed and interrelated as possible next moves. If you fight, there are too many of them; if you shout you might be attacked immediately; if you run, so will they; if you enter a building, they will come in after you; if you You don’t have time to think each of the possible moves separately, but they are implicitly at work in your bodily sensed ... which functions to determine your actual move.

Therefore this cannot be called “ambiguous” (Merleau-Ponty is so often interpreted with a use of this word) or “indeterminate” – which would mean *less* determined than one alternative. Rather, it is *more* determined. The alternatives are not choices that lie side by side; rather they (and the other implicits) play their inner detail on your move that will come.

Of course this shaping is not ideal. There is no exhaustive “all” as if the body totaled up *all* possibilities. Later you might think of something that should have entered in and didn’t. My point is only that a ... is far from indeterminate. Rather, much more goes into determining a next move, when

one moves from such a bodily ... A ... is *more determining* than anything already formed.

Should you “trust” it, as is often counseled, *rather than* analyze the situation? No not “rather than.” You would want all the explicit thinking you can manage. But certainly, even if you have time, you would not want to proceed without the *more* that is in the For example, suppose among the moves you can think of the only hopeful one is to turn a corner and quickly enter a building, but suppose that this idea gives you a trapped feeling in your body. Suppose you cannot figure out why it feels that way. Should you do it? I would say no. Wait a moment; something better might come, or do one of the others.

Suppose now that you are not alone but with a companion who has a lot of experience on streets in bad neighborhoods, perhaps her job for many years involved protecting herself on such streets at night. Now suppose you suggest turning a corner and entering a house, but the idea makes her body feel intensely uneasy – but suppose she can’t think why. Would you want to ignore that ...?

Later she may think of some past experience that was implicit in the Perhaps she was once caught between an open entry door and an inner one that was locked. But the ... is not at all limited to old, already-formed information. You can see that it is more, because after and with so much that is old, the bodily ... can imply and generate something new.

From contradictory forms alone one could only get indeterminacy. But the animal body functions also after and with all the human elaborations. It lives the alternatives further and can shape something new. When at last you make your move, it may well be something you never heard of.

An artist stands before an unfinished picture, pondering it, seeing, feeling, bodily sensing it, having a... . Suppose the artist’s ... is one of some dissatisfaction. Is that an emotional reaction, simply a feeling-tone? No indeed. Implicit in the ... is the artist’s training, experience with many designs, and much else. But more: the ... is also the implying of the next line, which has not yet come. The artist ponders “what it needs.” It needs some line, some erasure, something moved over, something The artist tries this and that, and something else, and erases it again each time. The ... is quite demanding. It recognizes the failure of each attempt. It seems to know precisely what it wants and it knows that those attempts are not it. Rather than accepting those, a good artist prefers to leave a design unfinished, sometimes for years.

In this example, the design is new; it has never existed before, and neither has the next move. A bodily ... can very demandingly imply something that has never existed before. And, if it doesn’t come, it may never exist at all, except as implied by a

Should we think of this as an unaccountable intuition? Or can we think of the living body in such a way that it could have or be such information and such demanding novelty?

The body urges and implies exhaling after we inhale. It implies feeding when hungry, and defecating when digestion is done. Living bodies imply their own next steps. This implying and shaping of next steps is usually attributed only to repetitious processes. But we see that the body also takes on the elaborations of quite novel situations, and then it also implies a next step, and may shape one.

The living body *is* an ongoing interaction with its environment; of course it therefore *is* environmental information. The bodily ... can contain information that is not (or not yet) capable of being phrased. But can we conceive of the body so that we could understand how it can contain (or *be*) information? It is not the usual use of the word "body."

Merleau-Ponty rescued the body from being considered merely as a *sensed* thing among other *sensed* things (as it still is in physiology). For him the body, sensing from inside, is an internal-external orienting center of perception, not just *perceived*, but *perceiving*.

That was a very big step in philosophy. Now let us move a step further. We have noticed that the body is not just an orienting center of *perceiving*, nor only a center of *motions*, a but also of *acting and speaking in situations*.

So far I have tried to show, first why one must not begin with perception, and then that the body-sense satisfies Merleau-Ponty's three themes: The body-sense after language moves beyond language. It is more than formed, and interactional.

Now I take up just two more points: thinking on the edge, and the order of primacy.

3.1 Thinking on the edge

How is it that the bodily ... has all this information, more than we can think item by item, and is also capable of such finely tuned novelty? According to the usual conception of the physiological body, it could not do any of that. Since it can, let us try to think of a living body in such a way that it could be information and novelty.

If we think of the living body – not as a piece of merely *perceived* machinery, nor as *perceiving*, but as interaction with its environment, then of course, the body is environmental information.

Animals bodies are complex interactions with their environments. From one ancient bone one can reconstruct not only the whole animal, but from its body also the kind of environment in which it lived. From the kind of

feet it had one can infer the kind of ground on which it moved. From its stomach cavity one can know what it fed on and chased. The body even as a dead structure still contains all that implicit information about its environment. When alive, its bodily life-process is much more implicit information. And this bodily sentience implies and generates the animal's next move.

Much more arrives at birth than a blank tablet. The body arrives already implying its environment very intricately. The human infant implies the breast and the mother. (Stern, 1985) Perceptions enter into an already intricate implied environment in which the five senses are already related. Infants come with good mothering already implicit, interpersonal communication already ongoing, the complexity of syntax already in place. They need not first be made from perceptions.

Of course we do not now have the body just as it existed *before and without* language. But that first body still functions now. After and with language it implies and moves beyond language.

Your body before language continues to live also beyond language now, as you listen to me. While you hear my words, you are not thinking your own words. Nevertheless your live body retains who you are, your past and all you know. What I say comes into all of that.

If we understand the body as environmental interaction we need not limit ourselves to sentient animals. Plants, quite without perception *are* bodily ongoing life processes. They also imply their own next moves.

In saying this of plants I am using this conception of our interactional body to develop a conception of living bodies that could evolve into ours.

Going now the other way, *this* conception of living bodies – even plants – would explain why, if such a body sensed itself, that body-sense would be a vast amount of environmental information – and why, if it lived this information forward further, it could move in new ways. And then, if such a self-sensing body could also *think*, and could use its bodily ... in its thinking, well, it would always think *after, with, but with more than* conceptual and language forms. This *more* would be realistic since it would *be* the body-environmental interaction.

All thinking involves the bodily ... to some degree. Take for example any ordinary sentence. In the middle of it you have an unfinished sense of how ... You don't know the end, and yet, all through it, as the sentence wends its way ...

It has seemed, recently, that there is no language in which to discuss what is more than language. Since we find that still functioning all the while we talk, of course it functions also to let me talk about its functioning.

And it is also with such a ... that we think. We pose ourselves some problem or some chain of thought. There is this, and that, that other, and then ... If we get distracted and lose hold of the ..., we go over the

familiar ground. This, and that, and that other, and ah That is where new thinking happens.

But it isn't a grand mystery. We must think with a ... in many situations every day. Even if the situation is only slightly troubling, it gives us pause. We know the routine things we can say and do, but How the body is being the situation is more than we can think in concepts or words. So we better think with the ..., think with the way the body has, lives in, is – the situation.

So it is not the case that you have only your perceptions of me, that our perceptions of each other are between us. Rather, we affect each other, bodily and situationally, whether we sense or see it or not. My warmth or hostility will affect your ongoing bodily being whether you perceive it or not. You may find it there, if you sense how your body has the situation.

The bodily ... is realistic. It *is* the interaction, and since the interaction is already happening, of course it is a possible interaction in the world. So, of course we can learn something about reality from it. The ... is always realistically an interaction and therefore right about something. As therapy shows, it can be chiefly (never entirely) a past situation. It can be realistic also about something that it newly lives and makes, something that has never been done before. So we understand how the body can think beyond anything ever formulated before – how it senses on the edge of human thinking.

That is why I encourage my students to attend very carefully to any sense of excitement, puzzlement, confusion or unclear un-ease, that might come as they read and think. What a human organism registers is never just nothing, never an indeterminate limbo. At first it seems to be just autistic. But the body is always already interaction; it cannot fail to contain implicit information with and from which we can think. Any human who attends to a ... thinks on the edge of human knowledge. It does also require some conceptual and philosophical skills which I cannot go into, here. One needs at least to be familiar with many theoretical strategies and many traditional moves, so as not just to fall into one with no recourse.

Laying something out in distinct parts changes it. Laying it out can kill it, but not if we keep the whole ... with us as we think. Laying something out can also carry the ... further, change it in a way that lets it develop. When we do think further in new distinct steps, we can also find and correct many errors. From a ... there are more than logical criteria that let us know what move carries it forward, what line satisfies the design that is not yet, or (in thinking) when laying a ... out “develops” rather than “kills” it.

We sense what continues our plant and animal life, and what does not. We sense what next move is stultifying, too comfortable, guiltily avoidant. We can sense when what we think is glued together, internally closed so

that we cannot enter. We know when we have woven a thin bridge of superficial logic over a problem that still remains.

These internal criteria of carrying forward a bodily ... do not insure against error, but they do show that there is error – and therefore also truth – in thinking with more than form.

3.2 *The order*

Let us begin with the body as we just re-conceived it, rather than the traditional order in philosophy which begins with perception first. Then relations or interactions are added, and then language and thought.

For example, Peirce called sensations “*firstness*.” They are assumed to be *opaque*: What I mean by opaque is exemplified by bits of color, smell, or touch. These are just what they are. Examine them as deeply as you might, in color there is just color. (See Moen, 1992, for a reading of Peirce in which firstness is not opaque.)

When reality is assumed to have opaque things at the bottom, then any relations among them must be *external* relations, *brought to* them. Nothing *within* a color or a smell inherently insists on its being related to some other color or smell. There is nothing within a color, but color. To relate these opaques, some force or movement must impact on them. Peirce called it “*secondness*.” Then, thirdly come the relations of language, thought, and universals, kinds, conceptual forms.

This order stems from the seeming opaqueness and unrelatedness of the sense-data of perception. Anything more complex must be brought to them, imposed on them from the top down. Empiricism depends on adding our procedures to nature, “torturing nature” as Bacon said. You must always bring something *to* the sensations because they have nothing *within* themselves. Therefore Heidegger went to the outermost generalities to find ultimate determinants of thought, above the very top of this top-down order. Therefore, for Hegel and Derrida everything is distinctions.

Merleau-Ponty moves far beyond all this but his “*first flesh*” and “*second flesh*” still retain something of the old order of first and second. Let us upset that ancient order altogether. If one begins with the body of perception, too much of interaction and intricacy has to be added on later. Perceptions is not the bottom. There is an implicit interactional bodily intricacy that is first – *and still with us now*. It is not the body of perception that is elaborated by language, rather it is the body of interactional living in its environment. Language elaborates how the body implies its situation and its next behavior. We sense our bodies not as elaborated perceptions but as the body-sense of our situations, the interactional whole-body by which we orient and know what we are doing.

What will you say about my paper? You have not formulated much of it *in words* since you have been *perceiving my words*. And yet your reaction to my paper has been accumulating all this while. Where? You have not had time to lay it out in discrete thoughts, and yet – there it is. If you want to speak now, where would you put your attention to find your comment? It is a bodily sense – perhaps of excitement or perhaps of unease and discord – and yet you can sense that it is internally intricate, a bodily implying of speech and thought. Where do you find that? Is it implicit in external perceptual patterns? No. But if you now attend to your bodily sense, many incipient thoughts ...

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